

DO WE LEAVE THE RUSSIAN JEWS TO THEIR FATE?

They Face Extinction, Unless —

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“ALL of Israel are responsible for one another.” So the ancient rabbis taught. Do we need to say any more than this to account for the anxiety that world Jewry feels for the two and a half million Jews behind the Iron Curtain, the largest part of whom are some 1,800,000 Russian Jews? This two and a half million is the remnant of the eight or nine million that lived in Eastern Europe before the Hitler extermination. And each of these Jews is precious to us because he represents a *type*—a particularly creative type of European Jew which it took centuries to evolve, and which initiated and sustained the most important developments in Jewish life of the past fifty years. It was the spring that fed both the flood of emigration to America and Zionism—the two basic movements of 20th-century Jewish history. Now this Jewish type—and indeed Judaism itself,

MORE than 2,000,000 Jews live behind the Iron Curtain; of these some 1,800,000 are Russian Jews. Of late, the world has become aware that in addition to the “normal” regimentation and oppression that the Soviet regime visits on the life and culture of all minorities the Jewish group has been the victim of a special campaign of persecution, elimination from official posts, and deportation to slave labor camps. JULIUS MARGOLIN, who witnessed at first hand the sufferings of his fellow Jews under both Nazi and Soviet persecution, sees the Jews behind the Iron Curtain menaced by an extinction as total as that visited upon them by the Nazis, and he pleads with world Jewry to arouse itself to action before it is too late, suggesting some measures that should be immediately undertaken. Mr. Margolin now lives in Tel Aviv and is the author of a book on his five years in Soviet concentration camps. This article is based on his *Three Lectures on Communism*, published (in Hebrew) in Tel Aviv a year ago.

in any and every genuine form—is threatened with extinction under Soviet rule.

For thirty years we did not know, or misunderstood, or were systematically deluded about what was happening to the Jews inside Soviet Russia. Thanks to the Prague trial and the misfired Moscow “doctors’ plot” we are perhaps no longer quite so simple-minded. Make no mistake about it: *the Jewish people is facing death in the Soviet Union*. Incessant persecution has so shattered and dispersed them that they stand on the verge of extinction.

Let us recall a few fundamental facts. The six million Jews of czarist Russia formed an entity, with centers in Warsaw, Riga, Vilna, Kiev, and Odessa. The revolution broke this entity up into several parts, thus laying the basis for the systematic destruction of Jewish life. The Jews of Kovno were cut off from those of Vilna; Warsaw’s Jews lost all touch with the Jews of Minsk and Odessa. The Kerensky revolution had given equal rights to the Jews. But the Bolshevik revolution deprived Jew and non-Jew of the right of self-determination and democratic development. The other nations of the Soviet Union, living as they did in compact masses on their own territories, were able to continue, to a considerable degree, as nationalities in spite of this. But the dispersed Jewish minority sensed their loss of freedom for expressing their distinctiveness as the beginning of the end. Their numbers fell off to a half of what they had been in pre-revolutionary days, while the area of their dispersion increased.

New Jewish centers arose in Moscow (where no less than half a million now live) and Leningrad, the Urals, Siberia, and Central Asia. But these Jewish settlements are permitted neither Jewish schools nor

Jewish newspapers, neither a national language nor Jewish religion or culture in any traditional sense. Communism, that is to say, placed the Jews in a situation which would inevitably lead to their assimilation and disappearance without a trace in the sea of Soviet peoples.

This assimilation was in no sense voluntary or "natural." As a first step, the Communist dictatorship closed down Jewish institutions and independent schools, abolished all Jewish parties, and systematically got rid of every Jewish public figure who opposed the Communist line on the "Jewish question." It took more than a decade for the underground Zionist organizations to be suppressed. Every stage of this repression of Jewish life was accompanied by arrests, imprisonments, exile, expulsions, suicides.

FOR the most part the world is unaware of Russian Jewry's tragedy. The incessant persecutions, and especially the physical exterminations that accompanied the consolidation of the dictatorship, are known to the outside world only in the most meager and fragmentary way. We know no more about the Jewish victims of the Soviet concentration camps than we would have known about those of the Nazi camps had Hitler won the war. We do know, however—I myself from personal experience during the years 1940-45—that the Soviet concentration camps number in the thousands, and that in all these camps Jews have died and are dying today: Zionists, Jewish socialists, "suspect" Jews, Jews whose only fault consists in their not having served with sufficient ardor the regime that destroys their people. In the past decades, some hundreds of thousands of Jews must have passed through these camps, prisons, and "isolators," or into exile; and I estimate that about 200,000 Russian Jews are today buried alive in the Russian forced-labor camps. This must remain an estimate—we cannot expect a regime that conceals the total number of inmates of its forced-labor camps to provide us with a "Jewish census." So thorough an expunging of Jewish life could not have been carried out by the

Soviet regime without the assistance of collaborators from among the Jews themselves. This is, unhappily, no novelty in Jewish history. The Inquisition employed recent converts from Judaism in its work of persecution. The Nazis created a privileged Jewish constabulary to assist them, their reward being that they were exterminated last. Their record of shameful collaboration with the forces of evil is fully matched by the Jewish Communists.

Communism destroys Judaism by slow attrition, not by outright extermination. In the first years of the Soviet regime, Jewish sections ("Yevsektzia") of the Communist party were set up to establish the Communist hold over Russian Jewry. While conducting a veritable war against any authentic Jewish national culture, the Yevsektzia demagogically supported Yiddish and Yiddish culture (in "form" only!—the "content" had to be "socialist," to quote a famous dictum of Stalin's), but only in order to destroy Hebrew. In fact a Jew could avoid persecution only if he renounced his history, culture, religion, and all intercourse with world Jewry—everything that makes a Jew a Jew.

In due time the Yevsektzia, having exhausted its usefulness, was "liquidated" in its turn. It had created a simulacrum of Jewish life that was a fraud from beginning to end. Now even that imposture was cast aside. The Moscow Yiddish publishing house "Emes" was shut down. The writers Babel, Kulbak, Bergelson, Markish, Harik, Eric, and others disappeared from the stage. The Communist-dominated Yiddish schools were disbanded (the Russian Jews had refused to send their children to them). Only the Zaslavskys and Ehrenburgs remained astride the ruins of Russian Jewish life—Jews who are more alien to the Jewish people than its worst enemies.

Biro-Bidjan proved as much a fraud as the Yevsektzia. As Soviet Yiddish culture was a pseudo-culture, so Biro-Bidjan was a pseudo-national territory; it ran a speedy course to ruin and nothing whatsoever is heard of it today.

What has remained of the Russian Jewish

people? A mass of isolated individuals who do not know the truth about themselves or their people, or even about their persecutors. What do they know of world Jewry? Only what Stalin has said: that it does not exist. Of the United States and Israel? Only the lies they find in *Pravda*. Of Zionism? Only what Zaslavsky and Ehrenburg tell them. Of the Bible? The overwhelming majority never even saw one.

Behind the merciless destruction of the Jewish people in the Soviet Union lies not an explicit hatred, but disdain for its interests, a denial of its right to self-determination, and a complete indifference to its fate. The Soviet dictators abused the simplicity of the ordinary Russian Jews and exploited the talents and revolutionary ardor of the Jewish intelligentsia, without feeling the slightest sense of obligation toward them. During the partition of Poland in 1939, half of Polish Jewry was thrown to Hitler for destruction, while a special agreement protected the Bielo-Russians and Ukrainians. In 1940 hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees from Nazism, instead of being offered help and a haven, were rounded up and sent off to suffering and death in the labor camps. To this day Jews rot in the forests of Siberia and in the icy wastes of the Arctic, in the Ural mines and in the farthest corners of the country, without even daring to call on us for help.

WE ARE told still that the people responsible for these sufferings are "not anti-Semites," and that we should appreciate the fact that they have not persecuted Jews with the savagery of the Nazis. There is much confusion on this score. Let me try to dispel some of it.

First of all, it is clear that the great majority of Russians are innocent of what the Communist party does to the Jews; the inhuman Soviet attitude to the Jews is simply a reflection of the fanatical policies of Communist officialdom. But in Hitler's Germany, too, the active tormentors of the Jews comprised a small minority; the majority were people who for one reason or another

could not find it in them to care about what was being done to the Jews. Let us remember that indifference to the sufferings of others is at the basis of most of the world's crimes—it makes them possible, indeed it *provokes* them. In the final analysis, Communist indifference to Jewish life and dignity is merely another variety of anti-Semitism—a kind of "cold" anti-Semitism—and under the totalitarian regime of Russia this anti-Semitism always holds the threat of mass extermination. The treatment of the Jewish minority by the Soviet rulers is governed by certain "common socialist principles." If the application of these principles results in the destruction of the Jewish collectivity, so much the better; it is not worth the trouble of even being talked about. But if the victims of the process show any signs of resistance, if they give the slightest indication of refusing to go along with their extinction as a group, then they are "wreckers," "Trotskyists," "cosmopolitans"—at this point, indifference changes into venomous hatred and the "disobedient" are destroyed.

The Jewish people which Communism denies in theory, it destroys in practice. But this is not the whole crime. The further crime is that the double-talk of the Soviet dictatorship is still able to divert world Jewry—that is to say, Israel and the Jews of the United States—from extending help to a Russian Jewry fast sinking in the Soviet quicksands. Russian Jewish families are split up without any hope of communicating with one another? Jews perish in camps and exile? But they are "speculators," Zionists, class enemies, rootless cosmopolitans. At a time when open anti-Semitism is frowned upon in "progressive" circles, this kind of cynical Communist demagoguery towards the Jews provides a convenient means for expressing concealed anti-Jewish attitudes. Racial anti-Semitism had at least this feature, that it excluded Jews from taking part in it. But Communism opens wide the doors to Jewish participation in their own destruction.

EVERYWHERE in the West, not excluding the United States and Israel, there is a

terrible indifference to what is happening to the Jews behind the Iron Curtain that is only several steps removed from the brutal disregard of Soviet officialdom. Is the Jewish conscience merely dormant, or has it been anesthetized? Instead of protesting against a crime that in some respects rivals Hitler's, many Jews ask why "busybodies" are trying to stir things up and make them worse than they are. Suspicion is cast on the motives of the protesters: they are "fanatical" anti-Communists, political opportunists, etc.

This mass indifference is by and large the natural consequence of the rupturing of the bonds that used to unite Russian with world Jewry—just as world indifference to the fate of the Russian people as a whole follows upon the breaking off of Russia's communications with the West. The breaking of these ties is not the doing of the Jews of Russia or the world, but of the Communist rulers of Russia, and it bears its bitter fruit in ignorance, apathy, and indifference. In the Middle Ages, Europeans knew more about the Turks, Chinese, and Hindus than we in the West today know about the life of the Jews in Russia. I say "more," because in the Middle Ages there were at least no official lies spread about the condition of the Turks, Chinese, and Hindus like those the Soviet authorities spread about the condition of the Russian Jews.

TAKE for example the Jews living in the Siberian city of Slavgorod-Altaisk, where I passed the year of 1946 in exile. They numbered many charming Jewish girls and vital young men. What do we know of their lives? What has been their fate since I last saw them? If I say that they live under conditions of the most extreme misery and persecution, most people shrug their shoulders; either they don't believe me or, worse, my statement makes no impression on them. Because for decades we have ceased to see, hear, and feel the human presence of the Russian Jews, they have become an abstraction for us. In these circumstances, brother forgets brother and friend forgets friend.

Even if it were possible to call the truth

to the attention of the Jews of the West and to convince them that the Soviet regime implacably wars on Jews *as Jews*, there are people in our midst who would oppose such a course and do all in their power to silence the outcry. Why? Because they have already written off Russian Jewry in their political calculations. But it is impossible to be for the hangman and for his victim at the same time—they have chosen the hangman. Some have gone beyond merely not knowing the truth, they do not want to know it. This is more than indifference, it is fear of the truth. The next step is hatred of those who insist on reminding them of the truth which they find it impossible to expunge from their hearts—the guilty, terrible knowledge of what is happening in the Soviet Union to their own friends and comrades.

In a sense, they choose the destruction of Russian Jewry, just like those "good" Germans who were not anti-Semites but hardened their hearts and gave their assent to Hitler because they expected him to deliver the great German victory. If one asks these Jews, "Why don't you fight against the evil that is being done to the Jews of Russia?" they answer: "We cannot fight against progress, even though it be founded on Jewish misery." Or politically, in terms of this special interest or that, it isn't "realistic."

I shall not debate with such as these. I know that a revolution that casts millions of innocent people into concentration camps is no decent revolution, that "progress" which leads to the extinction of an entire people is not progress. When Jews grow blind and deaf to the suffering of others out of an abstract faith in an abstract ideal, or because of political considerations, the vaunted humanitarianism of their thought and action is exposed as a hollow sham. If the tragedy of the Russian Jews continues to be passed over in silence, the entire Jewish people will themselves have suffered the greatest tragedy. Their inability to be aroused by the tragedy of Russian Jews will symtomize the dissolution of the ancient bond, the fellow-feeling, that has kept Jewry and Judaism alive through the centuries.

THIS apathy affects the Jews of Israel no less than the Jews of the West. How often have I heard Israeli Jews say: "What happens to the Jews of the Diaspora is not really important; it is only what is happening here that counts." Now that Hitler and Stalin have done their work, and eight million Jews have lost their lives or freedom, the remnant no longer interests our super-nationalists, and all responsibility for them is shrugged off. What Stalin began in the "corrective" labor camps and Hitler continued in the gas chambers is now being sealed by this un-Jewish, un-Zionist ideology. Indeed, if this callous philosophy gains ground, it spells the end of Zionism. Zionism is a serious matter—it is not for snobs or cowards. Israel's attitude to the Russian Jews is a test of the quality of Israel's nationalism, overshadowing by far the question of the "historic boundaries" of Israel. The wholeness of Kol Israel, the people, is a much more important matter than the wholeness of Israel, the country.

There is no greater symptom of national deterioration in Israel than the League for Friendship with the Soviet Union, which counts thousands of young people among its members, and large numbers of the intellectual elite. Whose friendship do the members of this organization seek? Certainly not that of the hundreds of thousands of Jews in the Soviet concentration camps, not that of the millions of Russian Jews doomed to forced assimilation, not that of the Soviet peoples who live under the same oppression as the Russian Jews. They seek the friendship of a government that murders Zionists. Membership in such an organization is no less shameful because this open solidarity with the executioners of the Jewish people is tolerated, evokes no protest or condemnation in the broad circles of Israeli society. We must take steps to restore the moral health of the Jewish people—for nothing less is involved. Day and night, we must reiterate the simple blunt fact that those among us in Israel who approve of or connive at the violence done the Jewish people inside the Soviet Empire are our enemies no less than

open anti-Semites and organizers of pogroms. And what I have said concerns the political and moral health of the Jews of the West as well.

BUT how will all this help the Soviet Jews? As a matter of fact, can we do anything at all for them?

As one who shared the fate of Russian Jewry for a number of years, I mean to answer this question as earnestly as I know how.

First of all, even if the most that is possible is moral support, we must not withdraw that essential moral support by abandoning the Soviet Jews to their fate. We must show them that we have not forgotten and will not forget them. The least we can do is to refrain from spreading the impression that we think they should be grateful to the Stalinist dictatorship for not murdering them *en masse*, as Hitler did, in extermination camps; it is precisely this attitude that breaks their power of resistance. Are there any people more isolated and cast away than the Zionists and Jewish socialists in the Soviet forced labor camps, who must perish feeling that their comrades have washed their hands of them, that even they don't care about their fate?

The efficacy of open protest against Soviet terror should not be underestimated; and we should make it our endeavor to counter the daily glorification of Soviet crimes, the daily flood of falsehood in the Soviet press, to protest daily, and to repeat the protests, to answer every lie. Naturally our protest will not free the inmates of the Soviet camps, nor frighten the people who shot Erlich and Alter and who keep Oren imprisoned. Nevertheless, our protests will have the effect of encouraging the Soviet Jews and stiffening their resistance against the pressures of compulsory assimilation. When Israel was proclaimed, hope revived in the hearts of the Soviet Jews. They will renounce Israel only when Israel renounces them. I would compare the situation of the Jews behind the Iron Curtain with that of a drowning man. It may not be in our power

to pull him out of the water to safety. But our protests and concern are so many life-preservers thrown to the struggling swimmer that may enable him to maintain himself on the surface until, perhaps, help does come.

THIS brings me to our last question. What are the chances of Soviet Jewry's being saved from physical and national obliteration? What are the chances of its being liberated from Communist bondage and rejoining the worldwide Jewish community? For me and many others this is no mere abstract question or "public issue"—on the other side of the Iron Curtain there are people whom we cherish and want to see again in this life.

There are two possibilities. The first is the collapse of the Soviet Empire as the result of defeat in war. The second is an inner breakdown of the regime without war. I exclude a third possibility: that a "miracle" will happen and Communism will somehow allow Soviet Jewry to live. This is an argument typical of fellow-travelers; it is used to justify and encourage passivity. No such miracle is possible under Soviet totalitarianism; totalitarianism has a logic, and that logic is against us. After thirty years of fruitless waiting, it is time that we drew the plain conclusion that the whole history of Communism has now made explicit. Only the destruction of the Soviet Empire from without, or its internal collapse, can save Russian Jewry.

None of us can possibly want a war. It is no secret that on the other side of the Iron Curtain millions of despairing people—Poles, Czechs, and Russians—look forward to a war as offering the only opportunity to throw off the oppressive Soviet dictatorship. But are there any Jews in the West who want war? Certainly it would be a fanatical nationalist who would desire a world misfortune for the sake of saving the Jewish people. I myself have no illusions about the special sanctity or world importance of the Jews. If I once had such illusions they have long since been dissipated. Jewish blood is no more precious than other blood; if the

salvation of the Russian Jews should require the shedding of the blood of millions of other people, why then their salvation must be foregone. I and people who share my attitude could not consent to such a war.

But no one is asking for our consent. What we want or do not want is no political factor in the situation. If war should nevertheless come—and every indication is that, if it does come, it will come by the decision of that same regime which threatens the existence of the Jewish people—then it ought to be clear that for Israel, and for all Western Jews, there can be no choice but to fight to the death—just as we feel we had to fight against Hitler—against the side on whose banner is written: "concentration camps; forced Sovietization; the destruction of Judaism and Jews."

We do not want war, and we do not know that a war is inevitable. What we do know is that we must without further faltering or delay launch a campaign for the preservation of Russian Jewry. The Russian Jews should haunt our minds the way God haunts the minds of Orthodox Jews; their memory should be nailed to our doorposts like a *mezuzah*. The doors of our homes should be kept open for them as the doors are kept open on the Seder night for the prophet Elijah, about whom we know that he will come without knowing when.

I HAVE in mind a number of concrete measures.

We need to compile as complete a record as possible of the Jews in the Soviet camps and places of exile.

We need to form an organization of former inmates of Soviet concentration camps, on the model of the organizations of former inmates of Nazi camps. To aid in this, and in other tasks, the government of Israel should be persuaded to grant citizenship to all Jews in the Soviet Union who are victims of political persecution.

The government of Israel should be persuaded to demand the right of emigration for the Soviet Jews, voicing this demand in the forum of the UN, in the various interna-

tional humanitarian organizations, and directly to the Soviet government.

Every possible means, from radio broadcasts to word-of-mouth messages, must be employed to inform the Russian Jews that we have not forgotten them.

We should organize a worldwide petition to the Soviet government asking that the Jews be permitted to emigrate. Such a petition may not unbar the doors of the Soviet Union, but it will have an invaluable effect on world opinion and will hearten and sustain the Soviet Jews.

In sum, Jewish society must be roused out of its apathy and mood of defeatist acceptance of the Soviet anti-Jewish policies; and, once it is aroused, the world will not be indifferent.

Nor should we fear accusations that such a program is "hysterical anti-Communism." Anti-Communism is a legitimate means of self-defense against a system that is anti-Jewish, anti-Zionist, anti-socialist, anti-liberal, and anti-human. If any other regime in our day were to oppress the Jews as the Soviet regime does, we should have to react to it in just this fashion, and we would feel we had every right and justification to do so. And the simple fact is that since the defeat of Nazi Germany there is only one government in the world—the Soviet Union—that persecutes Jews with terror and extermination.

How is it possible to separate the persecution of the Jews in the Soviet countries from the whole picture of Communist tyranny and aggression? Had any Jew said in 1938: "I don't want to fight Nazism, that's none of

my business. All I want is the repeal of the Nuremberg laws"—he would have been thought mad or worse. But in our day there are Jews who sincerely believe that it is possible to ask favors from Communist regimes and to limit oneself to mere formal protests without calling into question the political assumptions and foundations of a regime that aims at the kind of destruction of a people for which the USSR destines the Jews. Whoever is against the persecution of the Jews in the Soviet Union cannot be anything else but an anti-Communist, for that destruction is an intrinsic part of that totalitarian system; and vice versa, opponents of Communism throughout the world (so long as they are not enemies of freedom similar to the Communist themselves), cannot help being our friends and the friends of the enslaved Russian Jews.

Our special task is to arouse the Jewish public *as Jews* to an awareness of the annihilation threatening the Jews locked inside the Soviet prison house. And once Jewish public opinion is awakened, it will be possible to raise the question of the physical and cultural extermination of the Soviet Jews in the negotiations between East and West. For Jews the question of the captive Jews of the Soviet Union is the same kind of important matter as the question of the Korean prisoners. It should be clear that any concessions that we may wring from Moscow can only come as the result of organized pressure. As long as concentration camps exist in the world, under whatever regime, masked under whatever guise of "progress," the struggle against them must go on.